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ABSTRACT

The third of six volumes in the "Elementary Principal Series," this booklet is intended for beginning elementary principals desiring to develop an effective communications plan for reaching their various publics. The principal plays a key role in controlling both the quantity and quality of school communications. Although principals may feel more comfortable using one-way communication methods (newsletters, bulletins, and media announcements), they should also employ survey questionnaires, conferences, and other means to obtain feedback. Effective school communication plans are continuous, open, and frequent and involve staff and students. Elements characterizing healthy communications with staff include honesty, attentiveness, clarity, and consistency. The tone used in written or oral communications should reflect purpose and desired outcome. The principal must use every available avenue to communicate positive messages about the school tailored to different constituencies. Various communication methods (speaking engagements, newspaper and television coverage, and school newsletters), carry certain advantages and disadvantages. Telephone calls (both positive and problem) and conferences can be effective, if used appropriately. Tips are provided for communicating with peers and the central office. (12 references) (MLH)

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#3 The Principal and Communication

by George Pawlas
and Kenneth Meyers

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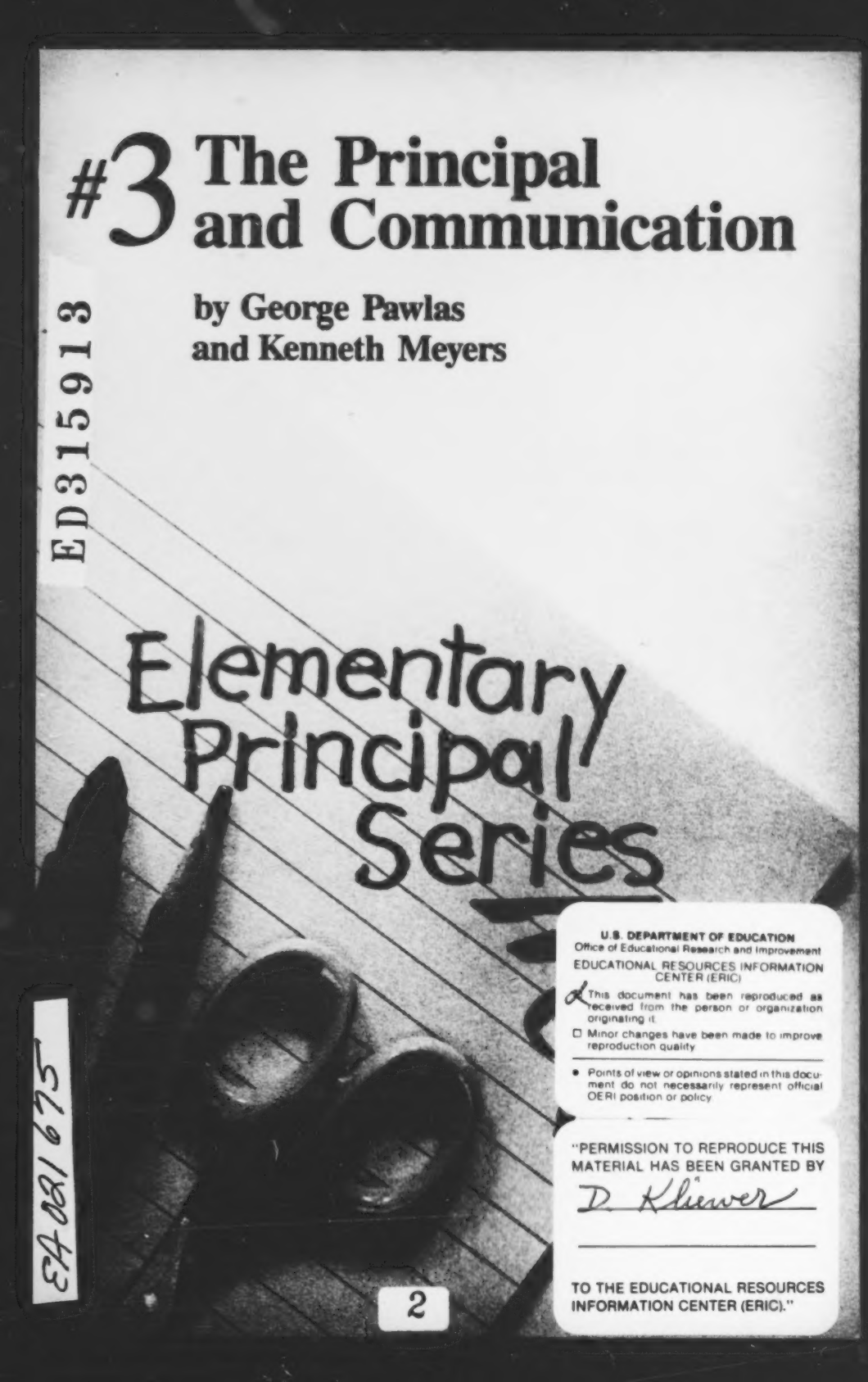
Elementary Principal Series



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Elementary Principal Series No. 3

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Introduction

The public's view of its schools is based on many factors: the quality of the teaching, the achievement of students, the physical condition of the school, and especially the communications received from the school. The principal plays a key role in controlling both the quantity and the quality of the communications that come from the school.

This booklet is intended for beginning elementary school principals who want to develop an effective communications plan for reaching their various publics. One of the authors (Meyers) is currently an elementary principal in Kissimmee, Florida. The other (Pawlas) has been an elementary principal and currently is an assistant superintendent in Swansea, South Carolina. The ideas, suggestions, and approaches presented here are based on several years of experience in putting them into practice. The booklet is light on theory but heavy on practical techniques for communicating effectively in the school and community.

The Elements of an Effective Communication Plan

School communications can be classified as one-way, feedback, and two-way. One-way communications are those in which information travels from the school to the receiver with no opportunity for feedback. Examples of one-way communication include newsletters, bulletins, and media announcements. Feedback communications are those in which there is provision for the receiver to respond with ideas, opinions, or evaluations. Examples are a community survey questionnaire or a clip-and-return form attached to the school's newsletter or other school correspondence. Feedback is easy to obtain if planned for by the person originating the communication. Two-way communications are those in which information flows back and forth between the sender and the receiver. A parent-teacher conference where the teacher shares information and receives information from the parent is a good example of two-way communication.

Most school communications are one-way. They are intended to get the message out through newsletters, bulletins, and form letters. Principals are familiar with this form of communication and feel comfortable using it. It is the easiest form to use and can serve many purposes. However, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of one-way communication because there is no feedback mechanism. The message goes out, but there is no way to determine how the message was received. In planning your communications program, you should be thinking of different ways to get feedback. The response mechanism can be as formal as an opinion survey or as informal as a discussion with parents at a PTA meeting or a chat with a staff member in the teachers' lounge.

A second element of an effective school communications plan is that it is continuous. It occurs on a regular basis. Too often schools

have limited their communications to times when a crisis occurs or, for example, when trying to win support for a new bond levy. If a community receives only crisis communications from the school, it becomes suspicious; it begins to question the motives of the school administration. But with a regular schedule of communications, the public feels informed and develops trust in what the school is doing. Then, if a crisis communication does become necessary, the public will see it in the context of the numerous communications it has received on more positive aspects of the school program.

Ideally, a policy of open and frequent communication should pervade the entire school system, with leadership coming from the board of education and the superintendent. But even if that leadership is not forthcoming, you as principal can institute such a policy for your own school and its constituencies: the staff, the students, and parents.

An effective communications plan for your school must involve your staff. They must share your goal of open and frequent communication and work with you in carrying out your communications plan both within the school and in the community. This means making certain that faculty and support personnel receive complete information and giving them an opportunity to provide input.

Perhaps the most important communications agents in your school are your students. Each of them carries messages home from school each day. What they report at home can go a long way toward increasing interest and support for the school. They, too, should be part of your communications plan.

Of course, if students are to communicate positive messages, they must have positive experiences at school. This means an instructional program that is challenging but also one in which students can succeed. When Mom or Dad asks, "What did you learn in school today?" teachers can help by spending a few minutes at the end of the day to review with the students what they have accomplished. This kind of "priming" will serve as a rehearsal for the inevitable question that comes up at the dinner table.

By observing the elements of effective communication described in this chapter, you will be well on your way to a sound communications plan.

Communicating with Your Staff

A major factor influencing the school climate is how the principal communicates and interacts with staff. In the best seller, *The One-Minute Manager*, the authors attempt to transform managers into communications specialists and advocate interacting with subordinates in short sessions with the focus on goal-setting, praising, and reprimanding. They make the point that effective communication should be brief and to the point. Their point is well taken, but we believe that it takes more than one-minute spurts with staff to establish personal work goals, to reinforce exemplary work habits, and to cultivate morale.

Staff morale results from open and honest communications, whether dealing with conflict (parent/teacher, student/teacher, teacher/teacher), policy matters, procedural matters, encouragement, or reprimands. There are common elements that characterize healthy communications when interacting with your staff orally or in writing, for praise or for reprimand. Let's examine some of these elements.

Honesty. Every interaction with your staff should be honest. Be honest about your expectations for achieving both immediate and long-term goals. When a reprimand is called for, be honest in telling the person what should be done to correct the situation or to improve performance. Do not sidestep the issue by being noncommittal or by talking around the issue. Be honest, too, with regard to what you know and do not know. Never try to bluff your way through a situation. It will come back to haunt you. Be honest in your expression of support and encouragement to staff. Look for opportunities to publicly and privately commend staff members.

Attentiveness. Healthy communication requires that you be attentive, that you listen before you respond. You demonstrate attentiveness when you establish eye contact, use affirming words or phrases

("Yes," "I see," "I agree") or ask clarifying questions ("O.K. Let me see if I understand what you are saying."). Clarifying questions also help to unscramble unclear statements ("Mrs. Smith, do you mean that the new science curriculum guide is totally inadequate or that just the section on mammals needs more detail for your grade level?") Being attentive and using clarifying questions encourages two-way communication.

Clarity. Lack of clarity in communications creates confusion and jeopardizes your staff's confidence in you. If a communication is not clear, you will have to spend a lot of time restating or interpreting what you meant to say. Written communications have a decided advantage over oral ones because they can be revised during the writing process to convey the precise message and tone you intend for an individual teacher or for the entire staff. Before sending out any communication, read it as if you were the receiver; or ask a trusted colleague to read it for clarity and meaning.

Consistency. A final element of effective communication is consistency. Regardless of the nature of the communication, it must be consistent with the school's goals and reflect the established policies of the school district.

With these elements of effective communication in mind, let us now look at the tone of the messages you send. The tone or voice you use often tells the receiver as much about your message as the words. Decisions about the tone you use in a communication should reflect your purpose and desired outcome. Below are five examples of staff communications with different tones, followed by commentary about their effectiveness.

1. Authoritative Tone

Memorandum
To: Sarah Stressful
From: Norman Nononsense, Principal
Re: Classroom Observations

After each of my last three observations in your classroom, I have pointed out that you use entirely too much sarcasm when dealing with discipline problems. Further, I recommended that you enroll in the inservice program, "Managing Stress in the Classroom," offered at Valley College. Please provide me evidence within the next three weeks that you have enrolled in the stress management inservice course. I have informed the superintendent of my actions.

cc: personnel file

2. Collaborative Tone

Memorandum
To: Irene Innovator
From: Harry Helpful, Principal
Re: Faculty Meeting Program

I am following up the discussion from our last conference regarding the new linguistics-based reading program you are piloting in your class this year. I would like you to make a short presentation on the success you have had with the program for our next faculty meeting on March 21st.

If I can be of help in your preparation, please let me know.

3. Complimentary Tone

Memorandum
To: Craig Creativity
From: George Gratitude, Principal
Re: Class Program

The program for Black History Week that your class presented for the parents was exceptional. It obviously took a lot of preparation, time, and patience. I thoroughly enjoyed it, as did the parents from several comments I heard after the program.

I would like to drop by tomorrow and tell your class how impressed I was by how much they have learned about famous black people and compliment them on the interesting program they presented for their parents.

Thank you again for your commitment to our boys and girls.

4. Informal, Friendly Tone

Dear Bob,

I really enjoyed being with you and your class on the field trip. It was great to get out of the office and be with the children again. I hope you'll remember me on your next one.

Thanks again,
Frank Friendly, Principal

5. Supportive Tone

Memorandum
To: Shirley Standtall
From: Sam Support, Principal
Re: Conference with Mrs. Grouch

After attending the conference with you and Mrs. Grouch last evening, I couldn't help but admire the way you stood up to her. You

made it very clear that the welfare of your students came first. But, as you saw, a conference with an irate parent requires some special skills.

I suggest that we get together and discuss some conferencing skills that will help the next time you have to deal with an angry parent. I will be prepared to share some things I have learned over the years. Make an appointment with my secretary and plan on about 30 minutes. The attached article makes some good points. Please come prepared to discuss it.

I look forward to meeting with you.

These five memoranda illustrate how words can convey different tones and thus send very different kinds of messages. The first one is cast in iron; it is authoritarian; it is threatening. The second one makes a request but backs it up with an offer of help. The third and fourth are friendly expressions of appreciation. The fifth deals with a problem that needs to be addressed but is supportive. It sends the message: "You did some good things, but there are ways you can improve."

Take stock of the tone of your written communications. Pull out copies of your correspondence over the past six months and try to categorize them by their tone. How many are blatantly authoritarian? How many give someone a pat on the back for a job well done. How many are constructive criticism but with an offer of assistance or support? This self-assessment exercise should help you to see ways of sending more positive communications.

While written communication has an important place in administering a school, a memo does not replace sharing a good story with a colleague in the hall or telling the cook in the cafeteria how much you enjoyed her peach cobbler. It is these brief face-to-face encounters that do so much to foster staff morale and to make the school a pleasant environment in which to work. In fact, most of the business of operating a school depends on face-to-face communication in casual conversations or in the more structured setting of a faculty or committee meeting.

A final type of communication with staff is your body language, which sometimes speaks louder than words. A smile, a laugh, a firm handshake, a pat on the back can all be used to accentuate what you are saying. If it is not your nature to be physically demonstrative, then be yourself; but make an effort to send your share of positive messages.

Communicating with the Community

The principal must use every avenue available to get out positive messages about the school to various constituencies in the community. And the messages have to be tailored to different audiences – parents, senior citizens, business groups, and taxpayers in general. There will be times, of course, when the message will not be positive. But if there has been a regular flow of positive messages and information, the community can accept the occasional message of bad tidings.

If your school has not had a tradition of communicating to the community, it is best to start small, using those techniques with which you and your staff have experience and skill. In the rest of this chapter, we shall present various methods of communicating to the community and discuss their advantages and disadvantages.

Speaking Engagements

Members of service clubs and social organizations are civic minded and want to promote the schools in their community. The local Chamber of Commerce and business groups need to be informed about the schools when recruiting new industry and new employees. Seek out opportunities to speak to these groups at their luncheon or dinner meetings. Once your availability becomes known, invitations to speak are likely to follow.

If public speaking is not your long suit, consider enrolling in a public speaking course at a local college. The local Toastmasters Club is another good training ground for honing your speaking skills. Several books are available on public speaking. A helpful one is *School Administrator's Public Speaking Portfolio: With Model Speeches and*

Anecdotes, by Susan and Steven Mamchak (Parker, 1983). It covers several areas, such as awards day, promotion day, and parents' meetings and includes model speeches that can be adapted for your local situation.

Newspaper Coverage

Another effective method of communicating to the community is through your local newspaper. School news is especially welcome in newspapers serving smaller communities because they like to feature local news. Most newspapers assign a reporter to cover school board meetings and other major news at the school district level, such as a bond levy or construction of a new building. Larger newspapers have reporters who specialize in education, and they both cover news and write occasional feature stories. But news coverage of an individual school's programs and activities usually falls to the principal or someone on the staff assigned to do publicity. Newspapers gladly accept these submissions and will rewrite if necessary for style and length.

Here are a few tips for submitting an article to your local newspaper:

1. Make sure your lead paragraph covers the who, what, when, where, and why elements of journalistic style.
2. Use short, concise sentences and limit each paragraph to one main idea.
3. Use lively, active verbs and precise adjectives to attract reader interest.
4. Write in a conversational manner, just as you would speak.
5. Check all facts, especially statistics, to make sure they are accurate.
6. Have someone proofread what you have written to check for punctuation and spelling (especially persons' names).
7. If photos are to be submitted, they should be black and white, be in focus, and have good contrast. Each photo should have a caption and the names of the persons in the photo indicated as left to right or clockwise.

Many schools have innovative and creative programs that would make an outstanding feature story in the local newspaper. As principal, you should be alert to programs that lend themselves to good feature stories and encourage your staff to do the same. When contacting the newspaper about the possibility of a feature story, be pre-

pared to give enough specific information to arouse the feature editor's interest. If a reporter is assigned to write the story, schedule time for interviews and photo sessions in the classroom.

School Newsletters

Probably the most effective vehicle for getting out the message is the school newsletter. In a newsletter you have control over the content, and you can design it for the audience you want to reach. An attractive and informative newsletter, if published on a regular schedule, can do much to enhance the image of your school in the community.

Publishing a school newsletter is an ambitious undertaking, requiring a team effort to write, edit, and produce it. A decision to publish a school newsletter must consider time, personnel, and funding. Whether you or one of your staff takes on the responsibility of editor, there must be time reserved if you are to produce a quality publication. Using parent volunteers with skill in writing, editing, typing, and proofreading can help to relieve the burden on you and your staff. In fact, you might find a volunteer who could work under your supervision and have the major responsibility of getting out the newsletter.

Costs for publishing a newsletter will depend on the number of issues per year, size of issue, copies per issue, printing charges (this will vary considerably depending on whether it is done in-house or by an outside commercial printer), and distribution method (by mail or sent home with students). These costs could be substantial for a school's budget, so you may want to consider getting sponsorships or advertising from local businesses to subsidize the newsletter. Be sure to give sponsoring businesses appropriate recognition for their support of the school.

Following are some tips for publishing a successful school newsletter.

1. A well-designed masthead helps to give the newsletter instant recognition. Include in the masthead the school's name, address, telephone number, principal's name, and volume, date, and issue.
2. Publish on a regular schedule and keep the news as up to date as possible.
3. Accentuate the positive. Tell about the good things going on in your school.

4. Keep the focus on people – staff, students, parents, and community volunteers who are doing interesting things at your school. People like to read about other people.
5. Keep the writing informal and friendly. Work in some humor. Use short sentences.
6. Do not try to crowd too much into the newsletter. Break up the space with photos or artwork. Use a type size and font that is easy to read.
7. Do not use the newsletter as your personal soapbox or allow others to use it for such purposes.
8. Collect quotations, jokes, and clip art to use as fillers. Be on the lookout for fillers for holiday issues: Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Valentine's Day, etc.
9. Include some student writing and artwork. This gives students recognition and helps to ensure that the newsletter gets home to the parents.
10. Proofread carefully for typos, spelling, and grammatical errors. Such errors reflect negatively on the school.
11. In addition to sending the newsletter to parents, distribute copies to realty offices, hairdressing salons, hospital waiting rooms – any place where people in the community gather.

Using the Local Television Station

One more vehicle for communicating with the community is your local television station. Although difficult to arrange, television coverage of school events can reach a segment of the community that has little contact with the school. Most coverage is brief, ranging from a 30-second to a two-minute spot; but it can have a major public relations impact when the positive aspects of a school's programs are featured.

It is not easy to get television coverage. Tom Hauff, news director of a major television station in Central Florida, says that his station receives 200 to 300 requests per day for television coverage of local events, with many of them coming from schools. Of those requests, only 30 to 40 make it to the living room television screen each week. He offers the following advice for breaking into the television spotlight.

The event must be unusual and have high news value. It helps if the event has a visual appeal, for example, students working on a community service project or a student participating in state or na-

tional competition. Says Hauff, "Imagine yourself in the middle of a crowd trying to get attention. Unless your message is unusual and creative, you'll blend in with everyone else."

The first step in getting television coverage is to notify the station by letter well in advance of the upcoming event. Address the letter to the assignment editor by name. If you don't know the name, call and get it so you can personalize the letter. Remember that the assignment editor may know nothing about your school, its programs, or the people involved. Therefore, your letter must be detailed and convincing if it is to make the first cut when decisions are made about story assignments. Provide complete information but avoid overstating the newsworthiness of the event. Hauff points out that organizations sometimes get carried away in their enthusiasm and misrepresent what they really have to offer. About a week before the event, send a reminder that contains a summary of the event and a few words about its news importance.

Following these procedures will not guarantee television coverage, but it will greatly increase your chances. Once having established a contact with the TV station and the assignment editor, you will be in a better position to enlist their help when another "media event" occurs at your school.

The various approaches to communicating with the community described in this chapter all require considerable planning and follow through. Begin with the approach that works best for you. As you gain more experience, you will want to try others.

Using the Telephone to Reach Out and Touch Parents

Family lifestyles today make it difficult to develop rapport with parents. With so many single-parent families or families with both parents working, your only contact may be when a problem arises requiring a parent conference. Yet there are many non-crisis times when you would like to let parents know about their child's progress in school. This is quite feasible if you make the telephone a regular part of your communications plan.

By making positive phone calls on a regular basis, you establish a reputation as a principal who acknowledges success in students. That's not a bad reputation to have! And if the first calls are positive ones, you have established a receptive climate when it becomes necessary to call with "bad news."

Scheduling your positive phone calls takes some planning. One way of organizing your calls is to use a separate 3 x 5 index card to record each student's name, phone number, and a few notes. If you call parents at dinner time or even at work, you have a good excuse for keeping the message brief. With a little practice you will find you can give your "good news" message in a minute or two. The results of your efforts will be evident the next day when students approach you in the hall with happy smiles on their faces and thank you for putting in a good word with Mom and Dad.

In our own schools we have encouraged teachers to make a positive telephone call to parents of every child in their class within the first month of school. If you as principal serve as a model for this kind of positive communication, then your staff is likely to follow your example. If some teachers are uncomfortable about making these kinds of calls, you might want to role play a typical call at a faculty meeting to show them how easy it is. Also ask teachers who have made these kinds of calls to share their experiences.

Making phone calls to parents when you have to report bad news requires a different approach. After identifying yourself, immediately get to the purpose of the call. If it is a discipline matter, relate the context and background information, indicate whether or not you witnessed the incident, and report the punishment decided on. If the corrective action requires the parents' involvement (and to be effective it probably should), suggest how they can reinforce what needs to be done.

After you have shared information, be prepared to listen. As you listen, jot down notes on points the parent makes on your 3 x 5 card. You may find that you have to ask a clarifying question. Paraphrasing what parents say lets them know you have heard their message. Record the date and time of the call on the card in case you need to refer to it later. The cards can then be place in the student's folder, or you might use an office pocket folder to file the cards. Still another method of recording your calls is a telephone log book using your own brand of shorthand for your notes. The advantage of the telephone log book is that you have a record of all your calls in one place. Below are examples of typical entries in a log book.

April 12, 1989
Mrs. Hare-Phillip-Gr. 3 (+) math work. 4:35 p.m.
Mr. Riley-Steve-Gr. 6 (-) recess misbehavior. 5:30 p.m.
Mrs. Kerr-Stephanie-Gr. 2 returned call re: homework assignment — referred to teacher. 5.45 p.m.

Also encourage your teachers to keep track of their phone calls in a log book with notes to indicate whether it was a positive call or a problem call. The log also serves as a handy reference when preparing for a parent conference.

Make the telephone a vital part of your communications plan. Consider using one of the new cordless phones, which give you the flexibility of making calls from any place in your building. However, try one out before purchasing one for your school, because some building construction causes interference with the signal.

Communicating in a Parent Conference

Conducting an effective parent conference requires the principal's most sophisticated communication skills. No conference should conclude with parents feeling that their questions and concerns have fallen on deaf ears. Nor should parents be treated with the condescending attitude that "We know what's best for your child."

Every conference situation is unique. Parents come to a conference with different questions and concerns and with different emotional states. Your choice of words, your ability to listen, your sense of empathy are all elements contributing to a productive conference atmosphere.

A carefully planned approach to parent conferences increases the chances for long-term success. Following are some suggestions for conducting a successful parent conference:

Pre-Conference Preparation

1. *Prepare yourself.* Examine your own emotional state to see if you have the composure to conduct a conference without conveying negative feelings. Do your body language, facial expressions, voice tone, and word choice communicate hostility or a desire to help?

2. *Collect pertinent information.* Information needed for a parent conference might include a log of discipline referrals to the principal's office from classroom teachers, school bus drivers, and playground supervisors; notes from previous parent conferences or phone conversations; and guidance counselor's observations of the student in classroom or free-play settings. In addition, the teacher can provide samples of the student's work, reports on the nature and frequency of classroom disciplinary infractions, copies of communications to

and from parents, and notes on family background. Having this information to review prior to the conference is essential for your preparation.

3. *Identify the issue*. Because time is limited in which to reach consensus on a course of action, decide ahead of time what you expect the conference to accomplish. Usually you will need to limit the conference to one issue. If the parent has requested the conference and comes with several issues to discuss, consult with the child's teacher to see if you can isolate the real concern.

4. *Arrange for participants in the conference*. Anyone who has information to contribute to the parent conference should be be invited to attend. Most likely to attend is the student's teacher, but others such as a special reading teacher, guidance counselor, or school psychologist might also be invited. All have busy schedules, so prior notification is important.

Conducting the Conference

1. *Set the climate*. Greet the parents and thank them for coming. Introduce any others attending the conference and describe their job responsibilities and their role in the conference. But keep "small talk" to a minimum so you can focus quickly on the issue. Arrange seating so that the parents do not get the feeling of "us against you." Avoid, if possible, the authoritative stance of speaking to parents from behind your desk. If seated around a table, have one of the participants sit next to the parents. Serving coffee or tea can help to relax the atmosphere. If the parent is likely to have a toddler in tow, be prepared with a box of toys for the toddler to play with.

2. *Focus on the issue*. Your first few statements should identify the central issue of the conference. If the parent initiated the conference, invite her or him to speak first. If the parent is hesitant about beginning or is talking aimlessly, you may find it necessary to direct a probing question to focus the discussion. For example, "Do I understand that you asked for this conference because Johnny has complained that students are hitting him at recess, and you feel we are not addressing the problem?" Zero in on the issue and begin.

3. *Maintain the focus*. Once the discussion is under way, be alert for digressions that waste time. If you sense that the discussion is straying away from the issue, bring it back into focus by restating the issue. Neither party must be allowed to monopolize the conference time. Keep your comments succinct and candid. Be firm but

caring. At all times convey that you are interested in the child's welfare and want to do what is right and fair.

4. *Take notes*. Notes provide a record to refer to for follow-up, for review with parties not present at the conference, and for subsequent conferences. It is especially important to have notes on what each party has agreed to do to help eliminate the problem. (Sometimes parents conveniently "forget" what they have agreed to do at home to help with the problem.) Notes might include such items as assignments, a statement of goals, timelines for achieving the goals, and any other information that you will need to refer to in subsequent conferences.

5. *Conclude the conference*. Restate each of the points or expectations agreed on in the conference. If time has run out and other issues need to be brought up, schedule another conference as soon as possible. Even if all differences have not been resolved, express your appreciation to parents for their willingness to come to discuss their children's behavior. And assure them that you stand ready to help in any way that you can.

Post-Conference Follow-up

1. *Send a note*. Sending a brief thank-you note the day following a conference signifies your continuing concern and helps to cement an on-going relationship for future concerns that may arise.

2. *Evaluate the conference*. After meeting with parents, jot down your impressions of how the conference went and any new information that came from the discussion. These will be helpful when preparing for future conferences.

3. *Follow up with a progress report*. Send parents a periodic report on the success or failure of actions the school agreed to take to deal with the problem or issue. Usually these reports are the responsibility of you and the child's teacher. Also inquire by note or phone call whether the actions the parents agreed to take are working. This type of communication indicates your continuing concern and gives you some insight into the parents' commitment to do their part in resolving the problem.

Dealing with Angry Parents

While the guidelines above are appropriate for 95% of your parent conferences, the remaining 5% of your conferences are with angry parents and call for a special set of skills and procedures. These

conferences are usually unscheduled, so you need to size up the situation quickly. Sometimes they occur after a confrontation with a teacher, and the parent demands to see the principal. While it is impossible to anticipate when this will happen, it should be standard policy that the faculty will notify you immediately when a confrontation occurs that they cannot handle. With your arrival on the scene, you should take charge of the conference. If children or other parents are present, move the conference to your office and ask the teacher to be available for consultation if it becomes necessary. In other situations the angry parent simply appears at your office door and demands to be heard.

In a high-tension atmosphere, your immediate objective is to turn down the heat. Speak in a calm, unhurried manner; establish eye contact; remain courteous; invite the parent to sit down; maintain your objectivity while the parent vents his emotions; avoid the temptation to respond in kind to a parent's loud or abusive language; and keep the discussion focused on decisions that are in the best interest of the child.

The first step in dealing with anger is to let the parent express his outrage. Hold off on any defensive tactics until the parent has vented his emotions. By listening carefully, you will likely find out what the underlying issues are. Sometimes you will have to leave the parent alone for a few minutes while you get the child's records or consult with the teacher. This time alone can have a calming effect. Then when emotions have cooled, you can guide the discussion toward a resolution of the conflict.

While listening attentively, jot down a few key notes that you can refer to when discussion begins. In your discussion try to use questions that will open up two-way communication. Use paraphrasing to show the parent that you are hearing the message and also to clarify any misunderstanding of what the parent has said. Summarize periodically before moving on to the next point. Stick to the facts as you understand them. And don't hesitate to acknowledge a mistake if you or the teacher has made one.

On rare occasions you will face the situation where a parent is so angry as to be threatening to you or a teacher. When personal safety is at stake, you should not hesitate to call the police. Have an emergency plan in place in which your secretary or assistant principal (if you have one) can notify the police if you cannot do it yourself. Often, simply a warning that the police will be called is enough to thwart a threat of physical violence.

Remember that all conflicts cannot be resolved on the spot. You do not have to make decisions in haste. In fact, sometimes it is necessary to buy time in order to conduct a thorough investigation. In such cases assure the parents that as soon as you have completed your investigation, you will contact them with your findings and recommendations. Give the parents a specific time when you will respond, mark it on your calendar, and follow through.

Every conference, whether routine or with an angry parent, should have some sort of follow-up. A few days after the conference, either call or send a note to the parent. Inquire about how things have been going since the conference. Ask if there is anything else you can do to help. This simple act tells parents you care, and it will do a lot to gain their support and cooperation in the future.

It is unrealistic to expect that every parent conference will conclude to the satisfaction of all concerned. But if you project a caring attitude, listen attentively, maintain objectivity, inject a dash of humor, and make decisions that are in the best interest of children, then parents will come away knowing that they have been treated with respect and courtesy.

Communicating with Peers and the Central Office

Among the many publics the principal communicates with are other principals and those in managerial and policy-making roles such as central office staff, the superintendent, and school board members. In this chapter we offer some tips for communicating with these key individuals in a school system.

Communicating with Principals

You have much in common with other principals in your district. They are your professional colleagues; some may become trusted mentors, some your closest personal friends. Maintaining an ongoing communications network with them will be mutually beneficial.

It is no secret that principals borrow ideas from each other, just as teachers borrow good teaching practices or bulletin board ideas from each other. Sharing is what education is all about. If your ideas show up in another school, remember that imitation is the highest form of flattery. If you publish a school newsletter, make sure the other principals receive a copy. Ask them to send you a copy of their newsletter. Another effective way of directly communicating with other principals is by hosting the regular principals' meeting at your school. By rotating these meetings among all schools in the district, principals can see firsthand what is going on in the schools.

Use the telephone to discuss problems and policies. If a child with problems has moved into your attendance area, the principal who previously had the child may be able to give you some insight into the family background or other pertinent information. Because principals are busy people, catching them in the office is often difficult. See if you can reach an agreement with your colleagues on the best

time of the day to make and return calls. Some principals have found the best time to be between 1:00 and 4:00 p.m. Of course, if the message is urgent, instruct your secretary to find you or to label it as urgent, so you can respond as quickly as possible.

Communicating with Supervisors

Supervisors and other central office staff are there to serve you. (Sometimes they have to be reminded of this.) They control many of the resources you need to run an effective school. Cultivate them with frequent communications. Win their favor by responding promptly to their phone calls and by submitting reports they request on time. Add them to your newsletter mailing list. Attach a note with the first issue and ask for their comments.

When invited to serve on committees they chair, accept and get involved in districtwide activities. (Remember, being asked to serve usually means someone in the central office has faith in your ability.) Invite them to your school to observe a particularly interesting social studies unit one of your teachers is doing or to participate in a staff development activity you have organized. These actions convey the message: "I have confidence in what I am doing and want you to see firsthand what we are doing."

Communicating with the Superintendent

A key person in your communications plan should be the superintendent. This person not only needs to know what is happening in your school but is likely to be the person who evaluates you. Needless to say, a regular flow of communication is in order.

Written communications to the superintendent should include a copy of your school newsletter and any fliers, bulletins, or announcements about special programs or activites in your school. Frequently superintendents request copies of faculty meeting agendas, school improvement committee agendas, or copies of minutes from these meetings. Comply without delay.

Invite your superintendent to special events at your school: open house, pancake breakfasts, PTA/PTO meetings, student performances, and award assemblies, to name a few. Obviously, your superintendent will not be able to attend all of these activities but will appreciate being invited, nevertheless. If he does come, be sure to introduce him.

If your superintendent makes an unannounced visit to your school without a specific agenda, invite him to tour the building with you and pop into classrooms where you know good teaching is going on. Use the informal time you are together to point out building maintenance that needs attention and to discuss other ideas you have for improving the school. With frequent written and face-to-face communication, you can convey to the superintendent what you are doing to make your school the best in the district.

Communicating with School Board Members

School board members need to be well informed in order to establish policy for the district. Although the superintendent has the primary responsibility of keeping the board informed, there are many things you can do to assist the superintendent. Sending them your school newsletter and inviting them to a special school function are easy things to do. Or you might be invited by the superintendent to make a presentation at a board meeting on a new program being piloted at your school.

As illustrated in this booklet, communication by the principal takes many forms for different publics. The principal must use all of these forms to get the message out and to receive feedback. We trust the suggestions provided here help to make you an effective communicator.

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